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PLANNING RURAL MASSACHUSETTS

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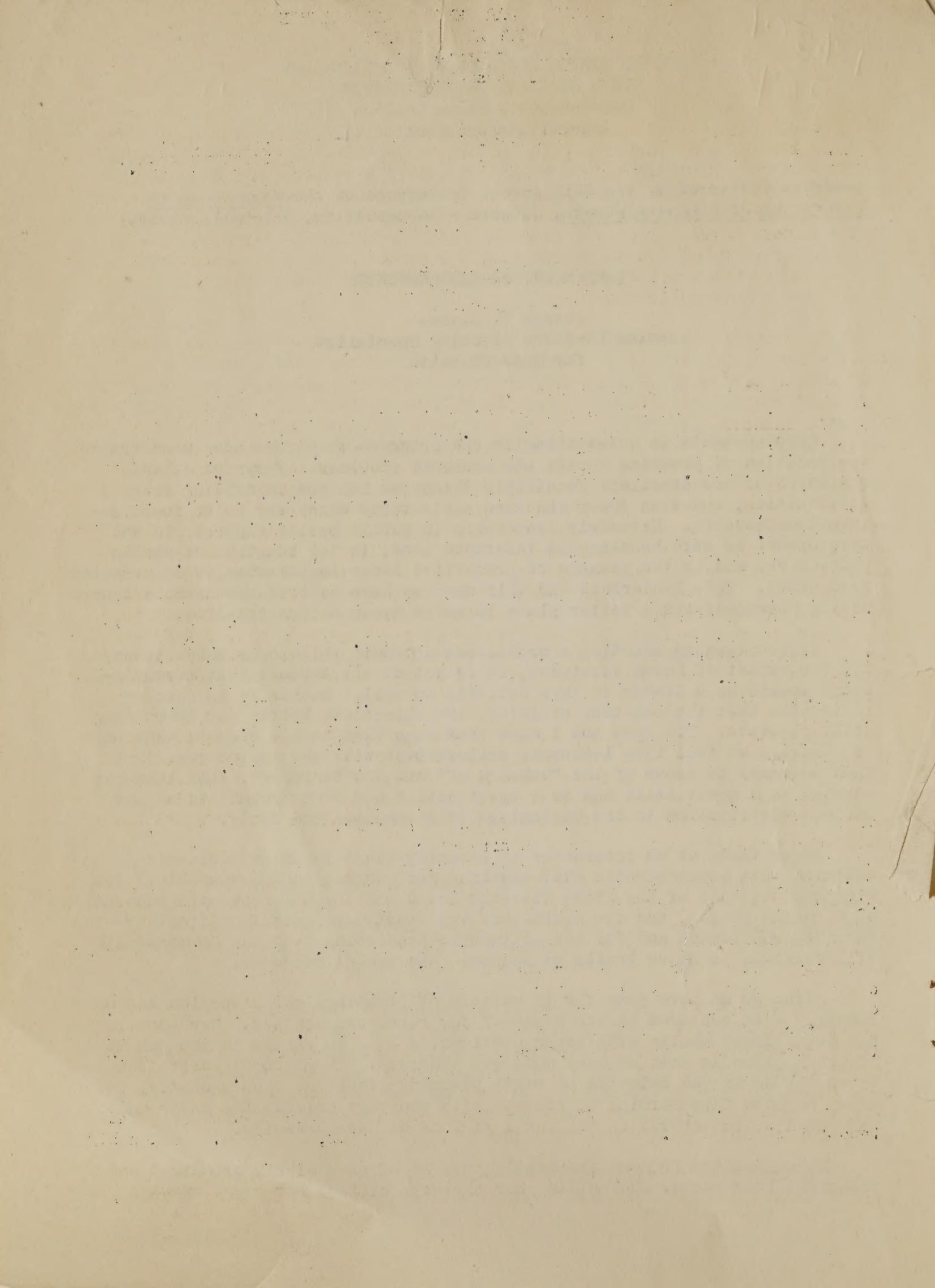
Massachusetts is outstanding in the progress which has been made toward the solution of pressing social and economic problems. Very few states can boast of the excellent leadership which she has had in solving these difficulties, and even fewer can show the results which are to be found in this Commonwealth. Her early leadership in public health control, in the development of safe banking and insurance laws, in the adoption of zoning protection, and in the passage of protective labor legislation is universally recognized. This leadership and this success have contributed heavily toward making Massachusetts a better place in which human beings can live.

Since planning embodies a social and economic philosophy which seeks the betterment of human existence, it is not at all strange that Massachusetts should be a leader in this activity as well. Rather it is further indication that the constant striving, the relentless battle for improvement still persists. You know and I know that when that battle ceases, that when as a people we fall into lethargic satisfaction with the status quo, that when we cease to dream of the "unheard of" and the "untried", that then our advance as a great state and as a great nation has been brought to a halt and our civilization to the beginnings of stagnation and decay.

Among those of us interested in planning there is an enthusiastic optimism that Massachusetts will continue her progress and leadership. The vigorous activity of the State Planning Board and the Massachusetts Federation of Planning Boards, and the conference here today are most justifiable reasons for this confidence and for the optimistic prediction that the Commonwealth will continue to blaze trails of economic and social progress.

Although we have gone far in matters of planning, our attention has only recently been centered on the needs of our rural communities. Our concern has been almost wholly with urban problems, and it is really in the sphere of urban planning that we have made our progress. There remain vast frontiers for us in the solution of rural planning problems. Consequently, it is my purpose this morning to discuss with you very briefly the major mal-adjustments encountered in the rural regions of Massachusetts.

Massachusetts is most frequently thought of as a highly urbanized and industrialized state. Her mills, her thriving cities, her busy, crowded high-



ways represent the average person's impression of this Commonwealth. To the average American, Massachusetts is one of the great workshops of the nation; and Boston and the metropolitan area surrounding Boston are Massachusetts. From the point of view of planning this is unfortunate. Those of us interested in planning must realize that extending beyond the metropolitan district, across Worcester County and over into the hills of Berkshire, are to be found great rural areas interspersed and intermingled with small urban centers whose problems are as pressing and as necessary of solution as are those of our large metropolitan centers.

In considering the relative importance of rural areas in Massachusetts, we lose sight, too often, of the fact that half of her land area is in farms, that within her boundaries are 35,000 farms, that the amount of investment in farm land and buildings is well over 256 million dollars, and that, of all Massachusetts industries, agriculture has the second highest capital investment, exceeded only by the cotton textiles industry. Such are the direct considerations pointing to the importance of our agricultural industry and our rural areas. But the indirect factors are probably even greater. It should be remembered that in no other part of the United States is there a greater heterogeneity of economic activity as exists here in Massachusetts. Drive along any typical highway in the State and you can soon sight great industrial plants, many of them employing thousands of people; drive on a little further, probably not more than a mile or two and you may find yourself on a stretch of road as wooded and as rustic as any in the wilds of Canada; drive still more, possibly but another mile, and you may well be within a prosperous and highly developed agricultural area. This heterogeneity is neither accidental nor are its parts wholly unrelated. Rather it is the very pattern upon which Massachusetts enterprise and wealth are builded.

Since the interdependence of our rural and urban areas is so tremendous, it is obvious that we must seek simultaneous solution for the problems of both in order that our planning be of permanent value. That we have not always done so in the past is all too apparent; and, if we are to avoid lost motion and wasted effort in our future undertakings, the coordination of rural and urban planning is essential.

The problems of our agricultural areas can best be described and discussed in terms of the "neighborhood unit". Since people, no matter how sparsely settled, react and interact socially as groups within limited geographic areas, the "neighborhood unit" is a more practical basis for approaching these problems than is the artificial geographical or political subdivision.

Broadly speaking, we have two major classes of maladjustments in the rural areas of Massachusetts: (1) Those due to chronic mis-use of natural resources, and (2) those due to a relatively recent industrial decadence. Utilizing this classification, virtually every rural neighborhood in Massachusetts exhibits some degree of maladjustment and most exhibit both in varying proportions. However, I shall deal only with those in which the extent of maladjustment is sufficiently acute to warrant study and public action.

The principal location of the problem units is to be found in the towns located on the eastern fringe of Berkshire County, in certain inland towns or



Cape Cod, and in the extreme southeastern portion of the State. When the major maladjustment is due to mis-use of natural resources, it is extremely difficult to designate the "proper use" because of the heterogeneity of Massachusetts economy. To illustrate: there are many lands in the western portion of the State which are unquestionably "non-agricultural". We know from examination of soil conditions, topography, climate, etc., that these lands will not support a profitable agriculture. Yet, if these lands are to be taken out of agricultural production, to what use should they be put? If they were in the great agricultural mid-west, the answer would be fairly simple, involving but a choice of one or two alternate uses. But, depending upon a host of factors which are difficult to isolate, this same land in Massachusetts might best be used for either forest, or public recreation, or rural residence, or summer residence, or suburban development, or wild life refuge, etc. To quickly prescribe the most economic and desirable use for a given piece of land pre-supposes complete and correct knowledge of our economy. Since obviously there is no such information at present available, it is necessary that each case of maladjustment in the use of resources be separately and individually studied.

With the above precaution in mind, let us examine more closely some of these so-called problem areas. A large number are to be found in the western portion of the state and are frequently referred to as "hilltowns". Outward evidences of maladjustment are to be seen in the form of run-down fields, decaying farmsteads, and extremely low standards of living. Generally speaking, they were settled relatively late in the history of the Commonwealth, some of them not until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Almost invariably they grew with astonishing rapidity, and there developed an economy which could rightfully be termed "prosperous".

The principal economic activities were lumbering, wood products manufacture, sheep and cattle raising, and general agriculture. Very rapidly the neighborhood "clusters" applied for and were granted incorporation as townships. However, with the opening of the western lands for settlement, and with the industrial revolution in the United States, these areas soon found themselves at a competitive disadvantage. Those people in the towns who could be termed "active" in making adjustments to their environment, left to seek opportunities elsewhere. The more passive folk remained behind to continue as before.

While the decline of these towns as agricultural producers began around 1860, today there are still many people trying to eke out an existence on lands which are definitely sub-marginal for farming. Actually many of them are not really even eking out their existence. Large percentages of the population are beneficiaries of direct relief or indirect relief in the form of "made work".

Despite overly generous systems of state-aid, these areas are continually suffering fiscal difficulties. Tax rates are high, while tax bases are low. The per capita cost of roads and schools is extremely high. Road systems which should have been long abandoned are still being maintained. Schools which could and should be consolidated are still run as independent and inefficient units. Such system, if it can be called that, is naturally expensive.

To a considerable extent, our present method of "state-aid" is to blame for many of these conditions. Much of the unwarranted town road work would never be done were it not for the financial support given by the State. Schools



not needed would be closed were it not for the financial encouragement given by the State.

One particular town located in northern Berkshire County derives over 75% of its fiscal income from the State as "state-aid". Only about 25% is raised by direct taxation. This town possesses approximately 300 souls, but for these 300 souls there are 56 miles of town roads. Approximately 6 miles can be considered as portions of through-routes, while the rest is maintained for the convenience of the 300 local citizenry. On one particular road, about 7 miles long, there are but three families, all of whom are on relief. Yet this road must be maintained and kept open at a cost as great as if there were ten times that number of families.

In the same town, during 1935, 80% of the employable male population received their principal cash income from work for the town, and from WPA. Thus, the taxpayers of Massachusetts are contributing toward the perpetuation of a town and a community whose economic pattern is incompatible with ordinary reason. The taxpayers of Massachusetts are subsidizing unsound land-use, a network of unjustified roads, inefficient schools, and are encouraging a residual population to remain in a region which cannot offer them either economic opportunity or a decent standard of living.

While it may be shocking it is nevertheless true that in some parts of our Berkshire hill towns, the level of human existence is strikingly similar to that of the much publicized "poor whites" of the South. The only differences are to be found in a lesser degree of illiteracy and a more virulent tendency toward parasitism.

I have outlined the conditions resulting from various maladjustments not in criticism of anything or anybody, but rather to emphasize the need for planning in those areas. State-aid systems do not contemplate the encouragement of unsound and uneconomic practices, but if they are administered without a plan, without regard to sound economics and logic, they will tend toward such paradoxes as I have indicated. In fairness to state-aid systems and what they have accomplished in rural communities, it should be noted that such instances of waste probably do not represent more than a fraction of a per cent of all monies properly and soundly spent.

Turning to maladjustments resulting from recent industrial decadence, we find ourselves discussing an old story - the story of the flight of industry from New England southward. Fortunately, recent indications point to a halt of this movement; and, if these indications prove correct, this reversal of a seemingly definite trend will stand as an enduring, practical monument to the co-operative efforts of Massachusetts businessmen. But the problems which this movement caused are by no means entirely solved. Rural communities adjoining industrial centers have been their local markets shrink or disappear entirely; rural people dependent upon part-time industrial employment have been thrown into an economic quandry; and the community life has been disrupted. These problems and others are awaiting study and solution.

The question arises, "What can be done?" As I have already indicated, there is no cure-all, and there can be no blanket application of a single



solution. Each situation must be carefully and impartially studied, and the conclusions thereby reached must be put into action promptly and by competent authority. Some problems may be met by voluntary cooperative effort; others will require the compulsion of public action.

Since time will not permit a detailed presentation of all potential methods of attack for various rural problem areas, I should like to limit the remainder of my discussion to but one of the most widely discussed corrective measures - i.e. "rural zoning".

Rural Zoning attempts to do for our rural areas what general zoning and planning have done and are doing in our urban centers. It has been said of zoning that its real purpose is "to provide a place for everything - in the right place" rather than the prohibition of any particular enterprise. Rural zoning contemplates a legal restriction upon the use of land based on those uses which will yield the greatest net return to the individual and to the community. Insofar as a use interferes with the general welfare of the community it is prohibited or restricted.

Progressive communities generally accept urban planning as desirable and beneficial. This may be attributed to the fact that the dividends which sound urban planning yields have been ably demonstrated. On the other hand, rural zoning is so young that the dividends which it will pay must still be proven to the general public. These dividends include lower taxes, better public services, higher standards of rural living, and the betterment of community life.

The broad objectives of rural zoning are the conservation of our land and water resources, the protection and stabilization of tax bases, and the reduction in cost and improvement in quality of public services such as roads, schools, and police and fire protection. Since these objectives are but manifestations of sound land use, rural zoning may be visualized as one of the legal means to proper land utilization.

The inception of rural zoning in the United States took place but four years ago in the State of Wisconsin. In 1933, the legislature of that State amended the General Zoning Enabling Act to permit counties to regulate the use of land in a rural as well as in an urban sense. This gave counties authority to divide their land area into agricultural, forest, and recreational districts and to forbid the introduction of agricultural enterprise into forest or recreational areas. To date, twenty-three counties with a land area of fourteen million acres have adopted zoning ordinances under authority of this act. Of their total area, approximately five million acres have been set aside for forestry or recreation, and the introduction therein of agriculture has been prohibited. This area, deemed unfit for agriculture, is almost equal in size to Massachusetts.

Other states, notably Indiana and Michigan, have adopted legislation to permit rural zoning. Since practical attempts at rural zoning are so young, it is difficult to estimate results accurately. The development of enforcement machinery and the perfection of zoning laws themselves are still in process. Consequently, the only indication of success at the present time is that public interest in these regions has been sufficiently aroused to insist on the improvement and betterment of existing rural zoning laws.



Massachusetts today has a general zoning enabling act, which, among other things, permits the towns and cities to "regulate and restrict the use of.... land", but its application to rural use is questionable. Therefore, in order to adopt any rural zoning ordinance, a town would probably have to seek an amendment to the general law, specifically permitting such zoning.

While many of Massachusetts' rural land-use problems are similar to those of the mid-western and lake states, the agricultural land-use pattern is so heterogeneous and the urban and rural developments so nearly resemble a patch-quilt, that the simple division of land-use restrictions upon the basis of agriculture, forestry, and recreation would hardly suffice. Rural zoning in Massachusetts would be a much more difficult process than in these other regions.

In the lake region, land not suited to agriculture is considered to have a "residual" use in forestry or recreation. So simple a classification would hardly suit Massachusetts. Rural zoning in Wisconsin is on a county basis, whereas here it would have to consider the individual town if not the individual farm. Soil and topographical classifications are relatively simple in the lake states, but in Massachusetts the complexity of the soil pattern and the violent changes in elevation over small areas would add to the difficulty of defining use-districts.

Consequently, any approach toward a solution of land problems in this State through the rural zoning method would entail greater care and more precision than in any other region of the United States. The problems which might be solved through these means are found in the sub-marginal areas of the Berkshire Hills and Cape Cod, and in the extreme southeastern portion of the State.

In order that I may not be misunderstood - I am not advocating rural zoning as a cure-all for rural problems. It should be considered as a possibility deserving of our study and consideration. Since its indiscriminate application might well do more harm than good, we must make certain that any plans based upon its use are competently conceived, competently executed, and competently administered.

In conclusion, I hope that I have succeeded in bringing to your attention the importance of our rural problems and of arousing your interest in seeking their answers. Your work as planners is an undertaking which, while it will encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles, is nevertheless worthy of your efforts. Planning will never pay dividends in glory, but it will yield returns, far greater, in the form of increased human happiness and satisfaction.

